

Oo was iss schenner uf der welt
 dass bimlin, root un wieser?
 un bloe un geel, im arebia felt
 was sin sil doch so neis!
 Ich wees noch gaut, in seltter toelt
 hab ich niks livers duu,
 dass in dii wisse—lang un breit
 so bimlin ksuucht wi duu.
 Doch iss es schun e lang-i teit
 id'r ich dart in dem felt,
 dii bimlin ksuucht, uf lang un breit,
 un uf dei bussem kschpell.
 Dr hent emool e gaertl kat—
 mei schwestertl un duu:
 Ich hab a pripeerd mit hak un schpaat
 dii blumme nei tou duu:
 un wuu ich hab im grossi schweel,
 dii kil dart himne ksuucht,
 dii leedi-schlipperst, wies un geel,
 hab ich mit heem gebracht,
 un hab sil in sei gaertl plantst
 bel nacht, in muundes licht:
 dr hent a net gewist, bis Juscht aet wanist
 hent dii a gegest a war mich.

—TOBIAS WITMER.

(As printed in Haldeman's treatise, PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH.)

DIE FRESCHLIN

Die Freschlin hen e grossi Yacht,
 Sie peife schier die ganze Nacht,
 Die Krotte duhn ne helfe:
 Doch wann ehmol der Reife kummt,
 So iss es Liedel glei verschummt,
 Sie gehn ins Bett am Zweile.
 Wann's nord e bissel waermer waerd,
 Es grosse Dreckloch ausgedaert,
 So Mitte in dem Yoll.
 Nord fange 'd grosse bullfrogs aa
 Un bloe, dass mer's heere kann
 So weit wie unser Mull.
 Wann ich yetz waer e Musikand
 Un kaem yuscht vum Fransoseland,
 Dort wu sie 'd Kaiser mache,
 Ich kraegi e music school in Gang.
 Die Fresch zu laerne, 's naechst nei lang—
 Ya g'wiss, du brauchschet nei lache.
 Ee Dutzend bullfrogs misste nei,
 E hunnert kleine Fresch derbel,
 Die Krotte far der Tenor:
 E grosses Loch voll Lagerbier,
 Des maecht de Fresch die Hets recht clear—
 Du weesscht—was waer yetz schenner?
 Nord kraegi ich mir en grosser Saal
 Un advertise en Sunndaags Ball
 Mit meine Musikante:
 Die Feggel misste all derzu,
 Der conder un der Uhu-hu,
 Die danste mit enaner.
 Des waer der human family
 En pattern of gentility—
 Sie kennecht sich imprufe.
 Sie hen in fact schunn ordlich g'laernt,
 Es gaebt emol e grossi Aardt,
 Der Guckuck waerd sie rufe.

—TOBIAS WITMER.

(Rauch's spelling has been recast for the ECK.)

Seventy-six years have passed since the appearance of the first scientific treatise on our Pennsylvania German dialect. It was published in London under the title **PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH: A Dialect of South German with an Infusion of English** (Truebner & Co., Paternoster Row, 1872). Its author, S. S. Haldeman, a Pennsylvania German who had achieved eminence in several fields of science, was at that time Professor of Comparative Philology at the University of Pennsylvania. He completed this work at Chickis, near Columbia, Pennsylvania, on Feb. 16, 1870, although it appeared in print only two years later. At that time there were but few writers in the dialect. For his illustrations Haldeman drew from the writings of E. H. Rauch ("Pi. Schweffelbrenner"), Henry Harbaugh, Rachel Bahn and Tobias Witmer. "Pi. Schweffelbrenner's" letters had been appearing since 1868; Rachel Bahn's little volume *Poems*, including among the English poems ten in the dialect, was published in 1869; Harbaugh's *Harfe* was published in 1870, although the poems therein had been appearing in the *Guardian* (a Reformed Church periodical) since 1861. The names of Rauch, Harbaugh and Bahn are well known in our dialect literature. But who was Tobias Witmer?

It would seem that Tobias Witmer first appears in Rauch's political campaign paper, *Father Abraham* as the author of the poem "Der Geburts-Daak" (dedicated to his wife), bearing the date June 1, 1869. Since that time the name of Tobias Witmer has appeared and reappeared, wraith-like, in the annals of our dialect literature without any further substantial information about his identity. Haldeman draws upon Rauch and includes in his treatise an extract from the above poem (p.42) and adds an English translation of his own. In a footnote on the same page he adds that Witmer was born in 1816 at Niagara, New York, in a small colony which had emigrated from Lancaster County, Pa., and where his father also had emigrated in 1811. This Pennsylvania German colony received additions about the year 1830.

When Rauch published the first number of his now very rare monthly magazine *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* (Jan., 1873) he included a poem by Witmer "Die Freschlin" and in a parallel column an English translation by S. S. Haldeman. The poem is however recast in Rauch's orthography, "in order" as he writes in the introductory remarks, "to enable those who are accustomed to our mode of spelling, by sound, to read Mr. Witmer's production" and he further trusts the author will not object. Since Rauch staunchly adhered to the English phonetics in writing the dialect, and both Haldeman and Witmer advocated the German phonetic system, there now begins the first of those endless controversies about our orthography which have continued down into our own day. In the first number of his magazine Rauch gives some consideration to Haldeman's recently published work, but other editorial remarks show that Rauch is somewhat nettled. In No. 2 of *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* (Feb., 1873) he publishes an extract of Witmer's poem "Geburts-Daak" but shortens it by six verses than the form in Haldeman's treatise and publishes Haldeman's translation of the extract—but recasts it in his own spelling! However, in the same number of his magazine Rauch could not forego printing a communication he had received from Witmer, dated January 13, 1873, setting forth a key to the sounds of the vowels in Pennsylvania German, advocating at the same time a complete system of orthography as put forth by Prof. Haldeman. Under this key, p.39, then follows a "Love Letter" (an mei Alti) written by Witmer, though signed "Peter Steinel" in Witmer's own orthography. The same number of *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* contains a letter from Witmer written from Buffalo, N. Y., Jan. 6, 1873, in which he extends best wishes to Rauch, the editor of *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* and bids this infant magazine God-speed. In it he writes in part: "Looking back to Pennsylvania for my Fatherland and my Motherland, I cannot be indifferent to the progress that noble State is making. Your undertaking is a wide step on the way of progress. 'Pennsylvania German' is good enough to talk, and why should it not be written? All honor to the sons of Pennsylvania who will write, and read, and practice what their fathers have said and done. Etc." In the third number (March, 1873), and which appears to be the last, Rauch included two poems by Witmer, "Der Shmae" which appears in Rauch's spelling, and "Deer Himmlt uft Eerda." These four above-mentioned poems and a fifth "Seks Oor", which appeared with English translation in Horne's *Pennsylvania German Manual* are the only poems by Witmer known to us.

But who was Tobias Witmer? We turn in vain to the historians of our dialect literature. Reichard in the *Index of his notable Pennsylvania German Dialect Writers and Their Writers* (1918), mentions these five poems by Witmer, but without any biographical data. Also he includes them in his anthology *Pennsylvania German Verse* (Vol. 48, Proceedings of the Pennsylvania German Society, 1940); Kloss in *Die Pennsylvaniaische Literatur* (Munich 1931) makes slight mention of Witmer; Roebacker in his *Pennsylvania German Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1943) reviews the five poems rather disparagingly and adds no new data.

But today at last we possess considerably more information. It is that which calls forth this issue of the *ECK*, entirely devoted to Tobias Witmer with the hopes that it may lead to further investigation and added sources. Several years ago the Rev. Harry D. Houtz of Harrisburg, Pa., submitted to the editor of the *ECK* a manuscript history of our dialect literature containing a wealth of interesting facts and details, with only a bare reference to Tobias Witmer. But the Reverend Mr. Houtz, indefatigable in his zeal and patience, continued upon the trail. Future historians owe him a debt for his discoveries. From him we now learn that Tobias Witmer traces his ancestry to Switzerland. He was the descendant of Christian Witmer and his wife Maria who settled in Manor Township, Lancaster County, Pa., during the decade of 1740-1750, through his son Abraham Witmer, born in 1771 who married Maria Habecker, the daughter of Christian and Esther (Herr) Habecker, on October 8, 1804, at Columbia, Lancaster Co., Pa. She was born in Manor Township, Lancaster Co., Pa., on Oct. 23, 1782. Thru Professor Haldeman we know that Tobias Witmer's father Abraham Witmer emigrated from Lancaster County to the Pennsylvania German colony at Niagara, New York, in 1811. The Reverend Mr. Houtz taking the clue offered came upon the century history of "Niagara County, N. Y., 1821-1921," from which he has furnished us with the following valuable extract (Vol. II, pp.636-637):

"TOBIAS WITMER, born October 8, 1816, in the town of Niagara, Niagara County, N. Y., was one of the most famous of the early surveyors of this region, his maps being yet the main reliance for the lot lines of properties. He was a genius in many other lines as well, having a reputation as an artisan, inventor, civil engineer, author, poet, patriot and preacher, and his life was prominently linked with the history of western New York and Buffalo. It is said there was nothing in wood or metal that he could not make. One of his inventions was the bicycle wheel, and his family still have in their possession a model of this wheel which he made years before the bicycle came into popular favor, the spokes made from the wire of an old hoopskirt. Unfortunately he never applied for a patent. A corn sheller, an automatic railroad switch, a pile driver, a portable signal tower for use in the army, a fire escape of which the Hayes ladder is claimed to be an infringement, and a simple contrivance to teach the transposition of the scale for the use of music teachers were also among his inventions. He wrote well, both prose and poetry, in English, German and 'Pennsylvania Dutch'; devised a system of phonetic spelling which received the commendation and endorsement of so high an authority as the late Prof. S. S. Haldeman, of the University of Pennsylvania; and was identified with educational work and projects in other ways. During one winter in the thirties he was engaged as a school teacher in the home district and was successful in that profession; was one of the founders of the Williamsville Academy, an institution

which at one time had an attendance of 400 students; and was its principal for a short time. Few men have given more practical evidence of patriotic feeling than did Mr. Witmer. On his forty-fifth birthday he enlisted for service in the Civil War, although he had a family of twelve children and reasonable plea for exemption, but he had no wish to avail himself of it. A daughter was born on the day that he took part in the battle of Fredericksburg, his son Christian was also in the service. Mr. Witmer was always a zealous church worker. For many years he was an elder in the Christian (Disciples) Church at Williamsville; established numerous Sunday schools in Niagara County and in the towns of Amherst and Cheektowaga, Erie County; initiated activities out of which grew the Christian Church at Suspension Bridge; co-operated with Mr. Honaker of Tonawanda in renting St. James Hall in Buffalo and arranging for religious meetings, which resulted in the establishment of the Christian Church in Buffalo. Services were first held in the old French church at the corner of Tupper and Elliott streets, and subsequently the Church of Christ on Richmond avenue was built, a branch on Jefferson street following. Mr. Witmer died August 14, 1897, at his home near Williamsville, beloved and respected throughout the wide circle of his acquaintance.

"On Nov. 24, 1837, Mr. Witmer was married at Snyder, in the town of Amherst, Erie County, N. Y., to Anna Frick, only child of Christian and Elizabeth (Long) Frick, and it is remarkable indeed that they passed their married life there and lived to celebrate their golden wedding under the same roof—indeed, at the time of Mr. Witmer's death they had nearly rounded out sixty years of happiness. A number of the original wedding guests were present at the golden anniversary, including the bridesmaid and groomsmen, David Witmer and his wife; Abraham Witmer and wife (who had celebrated their golden wedding three years previously); Joseph Witmer; Elias Witmer; Mrs. Susan Frick, and Mrs. John Goltwalt. The golden wedding cake was served on pewter plates which had been brought from Switzerland by Mr. Witmer's mother's grandfather. All of the fourteen children born to this union were present except the youngest daughter, Alice, who had died the July previous, Mrs. Anna (Frick) Witmer survived her husband until Sept. 14, 1908, dying in the house which had been her home for eighty-five years. She was born May 18, 1819, at Skimmersville, Erie County, N. Y., and was a young child when she accompanied her parents hither, the family being prominent in the early settlement of this section. About 1823 her father bought from the Holland Land Company by "Article", 136 acres on the south side of Main street, two miles west of Williamsville, whereon he settled with his family. It is now one of the most beautiful farms in the county, known for many years as the Witmer homestead. Mr. and Mrs. Tobias Witmer having made their home there from the time of their marriage. While her husband and son were absent on service in the Civil War, Mrs. Witmer managed the property herself and she maintained her mental and physical vigor to the end of her days, passing away after a brief illness. She was buried in the cemetery at Williamsville. Mrs. Witmer was a woman of notable disposition, her even temper, sympathy, usefulness, hospitality and generosity toward all endearing her to everyone who had the pleasure of knowing her. She was a member of the Christian Church for fifty-two years.

In Tobias Witmer we possess one of our earliest Pennsylvania German dialect poets and at the same time one who never lived in Pennsylvania, but spent his long and useful life outside the state of his origin; who nevertheless retained a fine sense for the dialect and the folk thought processes of his forefathers.

It is suggested by the Rev. Mr. Houtz that careful search through the files of the newspapers of Buffalo and of Erie and Niagara Counties, New York, might lead to still further information about Tobias Witmer.—P. A. B.